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SUBJECT: USS KEARSARGE VISIT A HUGE SUCCESS

¶1. (U) Summary. On November 22, the USS KEARSARGE concluded its two-week humanitarian medical and engineering mission to Guyana, the final stop on its six-nation "Continuing Promise 2008" mission. Medical and dental practitioners provided care at three sites in one of Guyana's more remote and underserved regions; the ship's engineering teams also carried out construction and renovation projects in five locations around Georgetown. The KEARSARGE's mission was well-received by the media, public, and government, with President Jagdeo personally expressing his thanks to the crew at a private lunch. Despite the tremendous logistical challenges involved in the mission, the ship's medical personnel treated a total of 6,642 patients; this figure constitutes more than a quarter of that region's entire population. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The USS KEARSARGE's final stop on its four-month, six-nation humanitarian mission began November 9, when the ship moored seventeen nautical miles off the coast of Guyana. (Note: As was the case with the similar mission of the USNS COMFORT in September 2007, the KEARSARGE could not come any closer to shore due to Guyana's shallow coastal waters. End Note.) Per previous consultations with the GoG's Ministry of Health, the ship's medical activities were focused in Region One, the country's northwesternmost province on the border with Venezuela, and also one of Guyana's more remote and underserved areas. Over the following twelve days, the ship's 150 medical and dental practitioners offered services in three locations: from November 10-15 in Region One's administrative capital, Mabaruma; from November 12-20 in Santa Rosa; and from November 17-21 in Port Kaituma.

What the U.S. Gained

¶3. (SBU) Media reporting of the mission was sustained and positive (to be reported SEPTEL), and reflected the positive perceptions of the public and the Government of Guyana. The highest levels of the GoG participated in the KEARSARGE's visit: President Jagdeo, Prime Minister Hinds, five Cabinet ministers, and the Chief of Staff of the Guyana Defense Force were flown out to the ship for tours, while the Prime Minister and another minister were also flown out for a site visit to Port Kaituma. With his participation in both the mission's opening and closing ceremonies, Prime Minister Hinds took part in five separate KEARSARGE-related activities, including while serving as Acting President for the closing ceremony. President Jagdeo was sufficiently impressed and pleased by the mission that he invited fifteen members of the KEARSARGE and Embassy teams to a private brunch at his residence on November 20. President Jagdeo expressed his gratitude for the work performed during the mission, noting that it had changed the lives of many Guyanese and he hoped that these joint activities would continue.

¶4. (U) Perhaps equally as compelling as the participation and public statements of the country's political leadership was

the buy-in and appreciation from average citizens. Three teenagers from the Region One village of Parakeese Island exemplified the local commitment to contribute by paddling two hours in a canoe -- each way -- from their homes to volunteer their time at the Santa Rosa treatment site. And upon arriving for their tour at the Port Kaituma treatment site, the Prime Minister and Charge were met by throngs of cheering children -- an image broadcast widely by attending media.

¶15. (SBU) What was probably the mission's single greatest accomplishment ironically did not involve the provision of medical care, per se. On November 18, one of the KEARSARGE's helicopters airlifted a 14-year old girl suffering from a ruptured appendix from Region One to Georgetown, where she underwent a lifesaving appendectomy by a qualified local surgeon at a private Georgetown hospital. According to the surgeon and the ship's medical team, without the emergency airlift she would have had little chance of survival. By amazing coincidence, and without the MFA, post or the ship knowing in advance, the young patient was actually a first cousin of Minister of Foreign Affairs Carolyn Rodrigues, herself a native of Region One who alerted the Charge to the relationship a few days later. The assistance rendered by the KEARSARGE helicopter squadron garnered highly favorable press interest after post informed the local media, although neither the post nor the MFA has mentioned the girl's highly placed relative, for fear of implying that she received preferential treatment.

What Guyana Received

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¶16. (U) Despite the remote location of many small villages in Region One, the widely dispersed population responded with immediate and sustained interest in the services offered. The KEARSARGE reported that its medical and dental personnel treated 6,642 patients during the course of the mission, which constitutes more than a quarter of Region One's entire population of 23,200 (2002 Census figure). There were also 66 surgeries performed; 36 were done onboard the ship by its surgeons, while doctors from a participating U.S.-based NGO, Project Hope, performed 30 surgeries at the Georgetown Public Hospital on individuals who had been pre-selected by the Ministry of Health.

¶17. (U) The ship's engineering and construction teams performed renovations and repairs at five locations in and around Georgetown. These sites included a regional hospital, a community center, a convalescent home for children, a school, and a playground. The work carried out varied with each site, but generally involved the installation of counters, sinks, handrails, stairways, outdoor lighting, security fencing, and playground equipment, as well as exterior painting and significant plumbing and electrical repairs.

The KEARSARGE and Embassy Team Effort

¶18. (U) An Embassy-wide team, involving most LES and U.S. staff augmented by SOUTHCOM/SOCSSOUTH support, facilitated and maximized the KEARSARGE's mission at all of the activity sites. Working closely with GoG ministries, the Guyana Defense Force, Guyana Police Force, and NGO partners, the interagency team assured that no mission-compromising logistical or security breakdowns transpired.

¶19. (U) Adhering to Mission Strategic Plan objectives, and following on the heels of a similar endeavor undertaken during the USNS COMFORT visit last year, the Embassy team organized a polling exercise to gauge the effectiveness of

pre-arrival advertising, as well as the level of patient satisfaction with the service they received. More than 4,000 responses were recorded. While the aggregated figures and analysis will be forthcoming in Septel once the data has been processed, a couple of preliminary findings stand out: approximately two-thirds of the patients had heard about the mission through word of mouth, rather than media or advertising -- a significantly higher percentage than was the case with the Georgetown-centered COMFORT mission, and indicative of the minimal access to media sources in such remote areas. In addition, among survey responses already tabulated, 98 percent of those surveyed indicated they were "pleased" or "very pleased" with the care and attention they received from the attending medical personnel.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: The patient volume and the logistics to support the ship's mission were remarkable achievements in light of the challenges that Guyana presented, principally the need to transport all personnel, patients, and supplies by helicopter due to the KEARSARGE's mooring well off-shore. This is especially true considering that the medical activities were performed in hard-to-reach sites in Region One that necessitated constant repositioning of the ship up and down the coast. Notably, unlike the COMFORT visit when there were minor rumblings of discontent that the immense public turn-out for US-provided medical services reflected poorly on Guyana, post heard of no negative reaction whatsoever to the mission of the KEARSARGE. To the contrary, the ship visit served spectacularly as the pinnacle of our year-long efforts in humanitarian assistance -- our highest Mission Strategic Plan priority. Although a huge undertaking for a mission of our size, the payoffs in political cache and public diplomacy outweigh the sacrifices. Keep the missions coming! End Comment.

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